

## NICCOLO PICCINI.

Niccolo Piccini, who was not less than fifty years of age when he left Naples for the purpose of outrivalling Gluck, was born at Bari, in the Kingdom of Naples, in 1728. His father, also a musician, had destined him for holy orders, but nature made him an artist. His great delight, even as a little child, was playing on the harpsichord, which he quickly learned. One day the bishop of Bari heard him playing, and was amazed at the power of the little *virtuoso*. "By all means send him to a conservatory of music," he said to the elder Piccini. "If the vocation of the priesthood brings trials and sacrifices, a musical career is not less beset with obstacles. Music demands great perseverance and incessant labor. It exposes one to many chagrins and toils."

By the advice of the shrewd prelate, the precocious boy was placed at the school of St. Onofrio at the age of fourteen. At first confided to the care of an inferior professor, he revolted from the arid teachings of a mere human machine. Obeying the dictates of his daring fancy, though hardly acquainted with the rudiments of composition, he determined to compose a mass. The news got abroad that the little Niccolo was working on a grand mass, and the great Leo, the chief of the conservatory, sent for the trembling culprit.

"You have written a mass?" he commenced.

"Excuse me, sir, I could not help it," said the timid boy.

"Let me see it!"

Niccolo brought him the score and all the orchestral parts, and Leo immediately went to the concert room, assembled the orchestra, and gave them the parts. The boy was ordered to take his place in front and conduct the performance, which he went through with great agitation.

"I pardon you this time," said the grave maestro at the end, "but if you do such a thing again, I will punish you in such a manner that you will remember it as long as you live. Instead of studying the principles of your art, you give yourself up to all the wildness of your imagination, and when you have tutored your ill-regulated ideas into something like a shape, you produce what you call a mass, and no doubt think you have produced a masterpiece."

When the boy burst into tears at this rebuke Leo clasped him in his arms, told him he had great talent, and after that took him under his special instruction. Leo was succeeded by Durante, who also loved Piccini, and looked forward to a future greatness for him. He was wont to say the others were his pupils, but Piccini was his son. After twelve years spent in the conservatory Piccini commenced an opera. The director of the principal Neapolitan theatre said to Prince Vintimille, who introduced the young musician, that his work was sure to be a failure.

"How much can you lose by his opera?" the Prince replied, "supposing it to be a perfect *fiasco*?"

The manager named the sum.

"There is the money, then," replied Piccini's generous patron, handing him a purse. "If the 'Dorme Despetose' (the name of the opera) should fail, you may keep the money, but otherwise, return it to me."

The friends of Lagroseino, the famous composer of the day, were enraged when they heard the next new work was to be from an obscure youth, and they determined to hiss the performance. So great, however, was the delight of the public with the freshness and beauty of Piccini's music, that even those who came to condemn remained to applaud. The reputation of the composer went on increasing until the foremost name of musical Italy, for his fertility of production was remarkable; and he gave the theatres a brilliant succession of comic and serious works. In 1758 he produced at Rome his "Alessandro nell' Indie," whose success surpassed all that had preceded it, and two years later a still finer masterpiece, "La Buona Figliuola," written to a text furnished by the poet Goldoni and founded on the story of Richardson's "Pamela." This opera was produced at every playhouse on the Italian peninsula in the course of a few years. A pleasant *mot* by the Duke of Brunswick is worth preserving in this connection. Piccini had married a beautiful singer named Vicenza Sibilla, and his home was very happy. One day the German prince visited Piccini and found him rocking the cradle of his youngest child, while the eldest was tugging at his paternal coat tails. The mother being *en deshabille* ran away at the sight of a stranger. The duke excused himself for his want of ceremony, and added, "I am delighted to see so great a man living in such simplicity, and that the author of "La Bonne Tille" is such a good father." Piccini's placid and pleasant life was destined, however, to pass into stormy waters. His sway over the stage and the popular preference continued until 1773, when a clique of envious rivals at Rome brought about his first disaster. The composer was greatly disheartened, and took to his bed, for he was ill alike in mind and body. The turning point in his career had come, and he was to enter into an arena which taxed his powers in a contest such as he had not yet dreamed of. His operas having been heard and admired in France, their great reputation inspired the royal favorite, Mme. du Barry, with the hope of finding a successful competitor to the great German composer, patronized by Marie Antoinette. Accordingly, Piccini was offered an indemnity of six thousand francs and a residence in the hotel of the Neapolitan ambassador. When the Italian arrived in Paris, Gluck was in full sway the idol of the court and public, and about to produce his "Armide."

Piccini was immediately commissioned to write a new opera, and he applied to the brilliant Marmontel for a libretto. The poet re-arranged one of Quinault's tragedies, "Roland," and Piccini undertook the difficult task of composing music to words in a language as yet unknown to him. Marmontel was his unwearied tutor, and